

FROM HOMELESS TO EMPOWERED: A PARTICIPATORY METHODS RESPONSE TO MULTIPLE OPPRESSIONS

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Abstract

This paper describes a participatory research/evaluation (PR/PE) project that has been underway for two years with a group of women placed in the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) system. Prior to the mandate for welfare recipients to align with TANF, fifteen women (the subjects of this project) were homeless in the greater Chicago metropolitan area. Chicago has been a center for African American Community organizers and adult educators to embark on the co-learning experience that helped community members “read their own world” (Curry, 2002, p.71). The participants became acquainted with one another through the TANF designated housing arrangements; they formed a support group initially, and this has evolved into a self and community development action agenda enabled through participatory methods. This particular agenda is centered on individuals taking responsibility for accommodating issues that plague everyday citizens; issues such as childcare, transportation, mandated employment, and training programs that emerge in the midst of the severe dislocation of federal and state welfare reforms and the bureaucracy that accompanies them.

Setting Priorities

In 1996, The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) was passed. This act mandated marginalized, underrepresented, minority adults to enter into the work force through a vehicle titled Welfare to Work. As the group discussions began, the women confronted the realities of the various policies of the PRWORA. There is a five-year format for financial support from the Illinois Department of Public Aid. The average cash grant in Illinois is approximately \$377.00 per month for a family of three (usually consisting of one parent and two children). These policies were created to promote long-term self-sufficiency, but the forces in power defined them. How many women on welfare were consulted in the development of this transition? I don't know and I have not been able to find out. Responding to these mandates, the women in this study felt it was imperative to begin a process where self-help initiatives became a daily focus. The women began their brainstorming in an effort to tackle the most pressing issue first: childcare at an affordable price that would also accommodate an array of working hours. The women called a special meeting requesting that all 15 women provide copies of their work schedules and the hours that they were required to work. The women arrived at the conclusion that if they could collectively create a situation where the children could be cared for without having to spend money, it would allow each mother the opportunity to save financially, thereby actually creating true self sufficiency. As the women began to process the fact that they were actually making a significant difference in their lives and the lives of their children they began to question why they had not created a viable solution for self-sufficiency before now.

Theoretical Framework

Participatory research (PR) projects are best evaluated using participatory methods. The project of concern here is an example of emancipatory participatory evaluation as described by Cousins and Whitmore (1998, p.6). Loosely modeled after Patton's utilization-focused evaluation design (1986, 1997), this evaluation situates the participants as evaluators since they are in the best position to answer the major focusing question, “What are the information needs of those

closest to the program?" (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2001, p.49). Further, there can be no doubt that participatory research and evaluation cannot be separated; a key feature of participatory methods is their reflexivity. The process described here also includes elements of empowerment evaluation as described by Fetterman, Kaftarian and Wandersman (1996). As such, the participants not only use evaluation to elicit important information about the program, which affects their lives, they also strive to use results for advocacy and change, and to achieve some sense of control over the program. In this sense, learning to conduct participatory evaluation is a strategy for "enhancing self-development and political influence of the participants" (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004, p.51).

Co-learning Through Participatory Research/Participatory Evaluation (PR/PE)

In keeping with the democratic and empowering methods of PR/PE, facilitators and participants function as co-learners and co-evaluators in a continuous cycle of action and reflection. Co-learning for the grass roots included the non-formal framework of friends teaching friends; co-learning is a form of learning with and in grass roots communities that challenges the power relations between dominant and oppressed groups as well as the notions of experts and novices, teachers and learners (Curry, 2002, p. 69). Although I initially became acquainted with this group through my community volunteer work as an adult educator (teaching self-esteem, time management, personal empowerment, and spiritual enhancement), my life experience mirrors that of these women. As a result, my role in the group made a rapid shift from teacher/facilitator to co-learner and participatory researcher/evaluator. After we mutually agreed on desired outcomes, my main role became one of a nurturer, to reassure the women that they had the power to change their current condition.

In the initial stage of this process, the women were excited to actively participate in literally changing their lives. They began creating schedules to provide childcare, plans to organize the best environment to provide adequate childcare; planning activities for the children, as well as a nutrition plan that would be affordable for all parties involved. As the women experienced empowerment, they quickly realized that they needed an evaluation tool that would provide a check and balance for the working mothers and non-working mothers. It was exciting to witness how the women decided to graph charts for spending, school schedules for the children, and meal times that accommodated working mothers' schedules. The women decided on a weekly meeting to talk about issues that they faced as they engaged in the process.

It did not take long before the women arrived at a point where they understood the methods of PR/PE and were able to carry them out. The function and responsibility of various individuals evolved. Each member of the group understood her role in the participatory process. The research/evaluation process consisted of four steps:

1. Evaluate the effectiveness of the solutions to issues as they arose (initially child care).
2. Discuss any issues about the PR/PE process that were inconsistent with the initial development of the plan.
3. Engage in dialogue that would provide the project with continued success through high levels of personal and collective accountability.
4. Monitor the development of the process and continue to evaluate both the positive and negative aspects and take corrective action.

What this linear representation of the PR/PE process fails to convey is its energy-giving and empowering nature. It provided an essential counterpoint to the disempowering structures of the

participants' lives that accompany the bureaucratic oversight of TANF and PRWORA. During the participatory process, the women utilized a system that was passionately referred to as "Calling you on your shit session." This evaluation tool was agreed upon by the TANF recipients in an effort to keep one another honest and accountable regarding accurate work schedules, and the amount of money each participant was responsible for with respect to the development and day-to-day functioning of the childcare process. Their meetings gave them the opportunity to celebrate success, problem solve, care for one another, and learn.

Importance to Adult Educators Working in Community Development

This paper is significant from several perspectives. First, it informs the reader, not from a statistical perspective, but from the subjects themselves, how the TANF provisions have seduced the public into thinking that Welfare Reform has taken place while further oppressing the recipients who actively participate in this bureaucracy. As the strict policies of TANF are experienced, it is imperative for educators to realize the oppressed state of consciousness these individuals face on daily basis. As Freire noted, "the oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom" (1970, p. 31). Although this particular process provided a tool to reduce the state deficit, at what cost? The country has been greatly impacted regarding the level of poverty that is currently being experienced by the nation as a whole. Adult educators might ask the following questions: What precipitates the fact that the welfare rolls are decreasing while the poverty level continues to increase? What is the adult educator's role in working with people affected by welfare reform policies?

Second, the paper describes the transition from support group to participatory researchers/evaluators for these women. As the women realized the value of this process, not only did their roles change, but they began to see themselves differently; they moved from victim to knowledge producer. The group quickly realized that if they were going to be successful, they must be solely responsible for their actions. The initial transition was somewhat strange; the women desperately wanted direction even after they had developed the strategy to provide childcare for one another. I remember one of the women stating, "LaMetra you are our leader, where should we go from here?" Although I understood why they wanted a leader, it was important to continue to engage with the women as a co-learner for them to realize that this was not a process of dictatorship nor was it authoritarian in nature. This required that I curb my own desire to step in and problem solve (very difficult for me at times) and redirect the group energy toward finding their own creative solutions, often through trial and error. I remember stating to one of my co-learners, in a joking manner of course, "Believe me Sista, this is harder for me than it is for you, because I am the oldest of eleven children from a single parent home with two children of my own; it is second nature for me to just fix the problem and move on to the next order of business."

Third, the "lessons learned" identified and captured by the participants as they engaged in continuous, formative evaluation were plentiful. I recall Gloria indicating that she wished someone had shown her early in life how to take control of her life. She stated, "Oh my God LaMetra, being in the driver seat of your own life makes you feel so good about yourself."

What was intriguing from the "participant observer" perspective was how the women had the ability to understand one another during this process. Operating from the standpoint that "exploring the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation positions people to willingly apply what they learn when they have created the knowledge out of their own

circumstances" (Gajanayake, 2002), we created small group sessions to engage the participants in assessing current situations. My specific objective was to challenge and to assure space for reflection.

As the group has gained confidence and skill in PR/PE, my role as facilitator has evolved. Through continuous evaluation, the women have crafted various "check-in" strategies in which they hold one another accountable for actions between meetings. Reflective analysis and evaluation have also provided the participants with periodic reports in a visual form – a picture of the work they are doing.

Although facilitating dialog and fostering critical reflection were my initial tasks, my role shifted to one of co-researcher and co-evaluator; not necessarily a smooth or comfortable transition for any of the project stakeholders. Consistent with the methodology of PR/PE, the evaluation is not a separate process but embedded in the continuous learning of the group. Therefore, the evaluation lasts as long as the group is engaged in the project and this project is ongoing.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Although participatory research and evaluation methods have been used extensively at the grass roots level in developing countries, they are much less common in the US. Capturing "lessons learned" is a practical way of impacting both theory and practice. It is important that the facilitator and participant decision makers maintain a critical balance through the change process because the nature of PR/PE requires that all parties be dedicated to the research, development, and evaluation of solutions to real problems in the lives of the participants. Paradoxically, as Cunningham (2002) has brought to the attention of adult educators, "the classroom is a legitimate place to study the democratic process as well as technical knowledge, therefore society has conditioned one to believe that knowledge is produced in the classrooms and libraries, "marginalized groups" also produce knowledge (p. 2). However, the conditioning Cunningham described is pervasive and seductive. This group of women had to overcome that source of oppression in addition to those imposed by TANF and PRWORA. The PR/PE process is one during which intellectual activity is evoked in order to provide different lenses, encouraged through the concept of friends teaching friends. The knowledge produced can then be applied to the participants' life circumstances. This highly contextualized knowledge is empowering when it is named and used by the producers themselves. Herein lies the challenge to adult educators; community development through the use of PR/PE requires both a unique skill set and mental model.

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